

What Freedom Means to Me

Sixteen years ago, I walked out of the American Embassy in Manila with a U.S. entrance visa. As I left the embassy shouting with joy, I looked at a seemingly endless line of fellow Filipinos and wondered how many of them would be joining me in "freedom."

You see, while growing up, my concept of freedom was America. My own country -- the Philippines -- struggles with widespread poverty, a lack of social programs, and corruption in law, government and business. Though a democracy, the Philippines offers little hope for the masses that hope to better their lives.

America, on the other hand, seemed to me a place of endless opportunity; a place where people's rights and privileges are respected and lifestyle choices honored. Simply put, America is the epitome of a free society. Each individual can walk the path of his or desire without fear of government repression. Upon my arrival in the United States, this country proved my perceptions true.

First, America gave me a sense of individual emancipation. In my native land, children -- regardless of their age or even marital status -- are generally subject to their parents' authority. After immigrating, however, I obtained a greater sense of adulthood with personal control of my life's direction. America offered me the chance to achieve anything for which I was willing to work without the hindrances of cultural and peer-oriented influences.

Secondly, freedom has come to mean the opportunity to defend this great nation as a partner with the American government. No mandatory service, no draft...just my husband and I choosing to share an Air Force career. We've traveled overseas, enjoyed solid pay and benefits, and have substantial say in the development of our long-term military lifestyle. That's true freedom at work in service to our country.

Thirdly, America's brand of freedom has enabled me to fulfill personal dreams. I'm tackling a master's degree in human relations; and I've been able to work, be a mother and volunteer at the same time. In this country, I can be Superwoman; something I would never have imagined in my homeland. There is no limit to what I can accomplish in a country that challenges me to excel and reach for the stars...that's freedom.

Finally, my sense of freedom has taught me to protect personal rights through participation in the government. For example, free and unbridled citizen participation ensures people can practice their faiths without persecution. Voting is vital to this freedom. I can honestly say that voting for the U.S. president for the first time was an event I hold dear to my heart.

Unfortunately, many nations are void of popularly elected governments. In these countries, tyrants, dictators and/or the corrupt hold power and suppress real freedom. In my case, thankfully, I've come to know freedom in its fullness. I'm fulfilling my dreams, and I'm excited about the unlimited opportunities ahead. Freedom has multiple meanings to me. But one word sums up all of my impressions -- America!